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If you love your local park, help us fix it up

KRISTIN SHOLTON, Anchorage Parks Foundation
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It's spring, and in Anchorage parks, birds are returning, green lawns are emerging, and soft-surface trails are drying out. Like most of you, I'm eager to enjoy parks and trails with my kids, and as an Anchorage Park Foundation board member, I am particularly excited about the summer of volunteer opportunities and park improvements we have planned.

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The Anchorage Park Foundation (APF) is proud to have raised \$16.5 million in four years to augment taxpayer funds for improvements in Anchorage parks. With support from the Rasmuson Foundation, federal and private grants and donations from folks like you, the APF has invested in everything from replacing benches, trash cans and playground equipment to providing Challenge Grants to partner organizations improving parks and trails.

Our investments in parks need your involvement to make them meaningful. That's why we work with the community and the Parks & Recreation Department to leverage public and private dollars to make the improvements that matter. Often, the projects we invest in are brought to us by Eagle Scouts or mountain biking clubs or simply a mom who wants a better playground for her kids and her neighbors' kids.

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That's also why the APF partnered with the Parks & Recreation Department to organize the Anchorage Parks Report Card last year. We asked you to tell us what changes are needed, and more than 1,000 people joined us to grade 53 neighborhood parks.

We heard you. You helped us identify fixes and now it's time to work together to make improvements. Some of the 53 parks will require more community conversation to identify appropriate projects, but we are moving forward this summer with the park repairs we can make immediately with our limited budget and staff resources. Unfortunately, due to the failure of the 2009 park bond, funding for capital improvements in neighborhood parks is limited.

That's where parks volunteers can help us stretch our dollars further. This summer, the APF and the Parks & Recreation Department are planning volunteer "Fix-It" block parties in 14 neighborhood parks. We're utilizing staff and contractor support to make bigger fixes, and asking volunteers to come help with projects like spreading gravel, clearing brush and removing graffiti.

Our goal is not merely to repair park equipment, but to build stronger communities. Our Park District Managers, construction managers, volunteer coordinators and recreation programmers are working together to connect with community members to plan events with something for everyone. Besides volunteer work projects, we'll have everything from barbecues to bookmobiles to invite neighbors to make their parks vibrant, safe and healthy community centers.

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We invite all of you to join us at these block parties to improve parks, meet their neighbors, and have fun in your neighborhood. You may talk with your neighbors and team up to keep a better eye on your neighborhood park. You can adopt your local park or join the graffiti busters (343-GONE). A loved and used park is safer for everyone.

Parks have the capacity to fill many community needs. Kids play, parents relax and everyone has a safe and healthy experience. In these tough times, what's better than a free, close-to-home recreation opportunity?

Let's all work together and pitch in to make our community a safer and more beautiful place. You can help not only by joining us at the Fix-It block parties, but by advocating for parks in your neighborhood. Attend your community council meetings and Assembly meetings. Write a letter to the editor and contact your Assembly Members and legislators to make sure they know how important parks are to you.

For more information about the 14 block parties we have planned this summer or to make a contribution to improve your local park, please visit www.AnchorageParkFoundation.org or contact Beth Nordlund at 343-4492 or NordlundBL@muni.org.

Kristin Sholton has been a board member of the Anchorage Parks Foundation since 2006.

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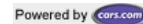
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